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CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF USING SYSTEMATIC SOCIAL OBSERVATION IN STUDIES OF NEIGHBOURHOOD AND HEALTH IN INFORMAL URBAN AREAS IN ALEPPO, SYRIA

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Background and Aims

Systematic social observation (SSO) is a method primarily used in studies of neighbourhood and health in western countries. The method is useful in measuring integral neighbourhood characteristics relevant to residents' health and well-being. Despite growing number of publications on the method, there has been none on its application to study informal urban neighbourhoods. The aim of this paper is to provide a critical discussion of the limitations and opportunities of using the SSO method to study characteristics of an informal area in Aleppo, Syria.

Methods

Twenty one observation points were randomly selected. Two teams of observers were trained to collect data on neighbourhood characteristics using an observational instrument with 32 items on land use; environmental quality and the social environment. The unit of observation (the spatial scale at which neighbourhood characteristics may differ) was identified as 100 meters of the right hand side of a street. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using percent agreement and Krippendorff's α .

Results

The inter-rater reliability ranged from poor to fair for most items. The main limitations included defining a meaningful unit of observation; the difficulties of validating whether the same points were observed and lack of routine health data at a small area level. The opportunities related to the novel application of a *Garmin* Global Positioning System and Google Earth maps to characterise an informal area and in finding out about variability in neighbourhood characteristics within the same area.

Conclusions

Systematic social observation is a valuable method to collect data on informal neighbourhoods especially, where routine environmental data are seldom available. However, special care should be taken to adapt the method and procedure of the observation to the context of informal areas. We offer several recommendations of how this method can be adapted to study informal areas.